H-Gram 024: Operation Cherryblossom: Victory in the Solomon Islands, November 1943

27 December 2018

By the end of November 1943, U.S. and Allied forces were on the offensive against the Japanese in the southwest and central Pacific along three axes of attack.

In New Guinea, Allied forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, supported by the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet, had completed the protracted capture of Salamaua and Lae, and were commencing a series of advances westward along the northern coast of New Guinea with the objective of reaching the Philippines to fulfill MacArthur's 1942 promise that he would return. (I will cover the New Guinea campaign in a future H-gram.)

In the Central Pacific, Admiral Chester Nimitz and the U.S. Fifth Fleet (under the command of Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance) commenced the drive for the Marianas and Japan by capturing Tarawa and Makin in the Gilbert Islands chain, in an operation code-named Galvanic. The bloody battle of Tarawa, and the high price the U.S. Marines paid to capture it (just over 1,000 killed) proved to be controversial at the time and in the years since, with a continuing debate over whether the atoll's capture was necessary or worth the cost. What is less well known was the high price the U.S. Navy paid for Galvanic, with the loss of the escort carrier Liscome Bay *(CVE-56) with over 640 of her crew killed, including Rear Admiral Henry Mullinex and Mess Attendant 1st Class Doris Miller (the first African American to be awarded a Navy Cross, for his actions during the attack on Pearl Harbor). A turret explosion onboard the*

Dawn on USS Saratoga*'s (CV-3) flight deck, during preparations for the air strike on Rabaul, 5 November 1943 (80-G-470943).*

battleship Mississippi *(BB-41) claimed the lives of 43 sailors. An additional 40 sailors were lost on the submarine* Sculpin *(SS-191), in which Captain John P. Cromwell chose to go down with the boat in order to keep his knowledge of "Ultra" intelligence from the Japanese. Cromwell was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor. Fighter pilot Lieutenant Commander Edward "Butch" O'Hare, previously awarded a Medal of Honor, was lost in a night action over the Gilberts. (I will cover Operation Galvanic in detail in H-Gram 025.)*

The third axis of attack, and the subject of this H-gram, was the culmination of the advance through the

Solomon Islands chain by forces under the command of Admiral William F. Halsey, commander, U.S. Third Fleet: Operation Cherryblossom, the U.S. landings on Bougainville, the northernmost major island in the Solomons. This operation would bring land-based Allied airpower within 200 miles of the key Japanese stronghold of Rabaul, setting the stage for its subsequent encirclement and isolation.

Key (or at least interesting) events covered in H-gram attachment H-024-1 include:

- *The last combat operations by future President John F. Kennedy in extracting a force of U.S. Marines (including future three-star Victor Krulak) from a diversionary attack on the island of Choiseul.*
- *The landings at Cape Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville, on 1 November 1943 by 14,000 U.S. Marines and over 400 U.S. Navy Seabees, including Carpenter Samuel J. Cox (my grandfather) and the immediate Japanese air counter-attacks.*
- *The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay on the night of 1–2 November, in which a force of four U.S. light cruisers and eight destroyers under the command of Rear Admiral "Tip" Merrill defeated a Japanese force of two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and six destroyers. These were unsuccessfully attempting to attack the U.S. invasion force and replicate the Japanese success at the Battle of Savo Island during the landings at Guadalcanal in August 1942. This time, thanks to better use of radar, the use of combat information centers, improved tactics, and experience, the Japanese force was driven away with the loss of one light cruiser and one destroyer in exchange for one U.S. destroyer badly damaged. Vastly improved U.S. shipboard anti-aircraft capability decimated a major Japanese air strike the next morning.*
- *The first U.S. carrier air strikes against Rabaul, on 5 November 1943. In response to the landings at Bougainville, the Japanese immediately deployed a powerful force of seven heavy cruisers to Rabaul, with the intent of attacking the U.S. beachhead, and for which the U.S. had no surface capability to match. Halsey boldly ordered the carriers* Saratoga *(CV-3) and* Princeton *(CVL-23) to attack the Japanese force in the harbor at Rabaul, by far the most heavily defended installation to be attacked by U.S. Navy carrier aircraft to that date in the war. The extremely audacious strike accomplished the objective of putting as many of the Japanese cruisers out of action as possible—all were damaged, four severely—rather than trying to sink some of them, forcing the cancellation of the Japanese operation and the withdrawal of their ships. This was carried out with astonishingly light casualties, thanks to innovative tactics and the introduction of the new F6F Hellcat fighter into major combat operations. This relatively unheralded attack is actually one of the most amazing in the history of U.S. naval aviation.*

  In the "First Air Battle of Guadalcanal," a large Japanese air counter-attack against the U.S. carriers following the strike on Rabaul instead struck a U.S. force of two amphibious craft and a PT-boat, which fought valiantly and escaped largely unscathed, downing several Japanese aircraft. The Japanese claimed a great, but imaginary, victory. The PT-boat skipper received a memorable congratulatory note from Rear Admiral Wilkinson, Third Fleet amphibious force commander) that concluded with "Fireplug Sprinkles Dog."
- *Second U.S. carrier strike on Rabaul on 11 November 1943.* Saratoga *and* Princeton*, joined by a second carrier group with the new* Essex*-class carriers* Essex *(CV-9) and* Bunker Hill *(CV-17) plus the light carrier* Independence *(CVL-22), launched a second massive strike on Rabaul. Poor weather, delay, and lack of targets made this attack less effective than the first one. Noteworthy was the combat debut of the new SB2C-1 Helldiver dive bomber, which performed very well. The Japanese countered with one of the largest anti-carrier strikes of the war, which achieved virtually nothing thanks to the new Hellcats (and F-4U Corsairs, temporarily embarked on* Bunker Hill*), and new U.S. shipboard radar and anti-aircraft defenses.*

Following the carrier strikes on Rabaul, the Japanese were still able to conduct fairly large-scale air attacks against U.S. ships bringing reinforcements and supplies to Bougainville. These air attacks were mostly noteworthy for extravagant claims compared to minimal results, and heavy Japanese aircraft losses. Several U.S. cruisers were damaged in these attacks, and the fast destroyer transport McKean *(DD-90/APD-5) was sunk with a significant number of her crew and Marine passengers. McKean had been the sole survivor of Transport Division 12, which had sustained the Marines ashore on Guadalcanal during the darkest days after the Battle of Savo Island in August 1942.*

- *Battle of Cape St. George, 25 November 1943. A force of five U.S. destroyers, under the command of Captain (and future CNO) Arleigh Burke, engaged a force of five Japanese destroyers in a night action between Bougainville and Rabaul. With effective use of radar, combat information centers, and new and innovative tactics, Burke's destroyers sank three of the Japanese destroyers and damaged a fourth without receiving a single hit in return, and without losing a single man. This was the last major surface action of the Solomon Islands campaign that had begun with the landings at Guadalcanal, and was the culmination of an extremely bitter and ferocious contest between the U.S. Navy and the Imperial Japanese navy for control of the Solomons, during which losses were extremely high, and extraordinary valor was abundant—on both sides. In the end, though, the U.S. Navy could replace losses and the Japanese could not. New U.S. Cleveland-class light cruisers, Fletcher-class destroyers, Hellcats, Corsairs, new radars, combat information centers, new tactics, all coupled with hard-won experience, outclassed and overpowered the enemy.*

For more on Operation Cherryblossom and the U.S. victory in the Solomon Islands, please see attachment H-024-1.

Two 50th Anniversary events of note (that I will cover in more detail in the next H-gram) include:

- *Apollo 8 Mission to the moon. On 21 December 1968, Apollo 8 was launched with a three-man crew that included Navy pilot James Lovell, in the first mission to leave earth orbit, reach and orbit the moon, and return safely. The crew was also the first to ever see an "earthrise." The Christmas Eve broadcast by astronauts Borman, Lovell, and Anders was the most-watched TV broadcast of all time to that point, and was certainly one of the most memorable, powerful, and moving events that I can remember from my youth.*
- *Release of the crew of USS* Pueblo *(AGER-2) from North Korea. On 23 December 1968, the surviving 82 members of the crew of Pueblo were returned to U.S. control across the "bridge of no return," into South Korea following almost a year of often-brutal captivity. Their release was secured when the U.S. government signed a written apology and an admission that the Pueblo was spying, and that the U.S. would not spy on North Korea in the future. The signing was preceded by an oral statement stipulating that the U.S. was only signing the document to secure the release of the crew, (i.e., we didn't really mean we were sorry). This kabuki, however, satisfied the North Koreans. The "confession" that was signed under duress by Pueblo's skipper, Commander "Pete" Bucher, while in captivity, is one of the most amazing satirical documents ever written (it was astonishing that the North Koreans fell for it). I will include it in H-Gram 025.*

I regret that with the unfortunate number of flag officer passing notes in the last month I have fallen behind in tracking with 75th anniversary events of World War II. However, my trusty staff has managed to keep up with articles, photos, and documents on the Naval History and Heritage Command website, so you can always find interesting and constantly updated things there.

Back issues of H-grams (enhanced by photos and charts) can be accessed here [https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams.html]

Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., commander, South Pacific Force (seated in center, hatless) at a planning session behind the front line on Bougainville with Marine Corps Major Generals Allan H. Turnage and Roy S. Geiger, November 1943 (80-G-161595).

H-024-1: Operation Cherryblossom—The Invasion of Bougainville and Victory in the Solomon Islands

H-Gram 024, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

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Background for the Invasion of Bougainville

The original intent of U.S. and Allied operations in the Solomon Islands chain in 1942–43 was to advance and capture the heavily fortified Japanese stronghold at Rabaul, on the island of New Britain, just northwest of the Solomons. The advance took longer than anticipated due to a shortage of resources and the ferocity of Japanese resistance in the central Solomon Islands. By mid-1943, senior Allied commanders had agreed that trying to capture Rabaul would be too time-consuming and costly, opting instead to occupy locations around Rabaul and bomb, isolate, and starve it into submission, and essentially bypass it under an

umbrella strategy termed Operation Cartwheel. A key to Operation Cartwheel was to land and establish airfields on the island of Bougainville, at the northwest end of the Solomon Islands chain, which would put Rabaul within range (about 200 miles) of fighters and tactical bombers. The challenge was that the Japanese already had four airfields and a seaplane base on Bougainville or small islands close to it, as well as about 40,000 combat troops of the Seventeenth Army and 20,000 construction troops.

The landings on Bougainville were in the Southwest Pacific Area of Operations and under the overall command of General Douglas MacArthur. However, MacArthur delegated planning and operational authority for the operation to Admiral William F. Halsey, Commander of the U.S. Third Fleet. Tactical control of the operation was further delegated to the commander of Third Fleet Amphibious Force, Rear Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson. Wilkinson was a highly regarded commander, especially by those who worked for him, as he was far more even-tempered that his predecessor, Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. Wilkinson had been first in his class at the Naval Academy and, among many jobs, he had served as the director of naval intelligence for a period in 1941–42 that included the attack on Pearl Harbor. He would be credited with being a key developer of the "leapfrog" strategy for the Pacific War. (He died just after the war's end when his car fell off a ferry in Hampton Roads; he was able to save his wife, but not himself, an event that only added fuel to Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories.)

Bougainville had been a German colony before World War I and, as a result, the native islanders were less hospitable to Australian coast watchers than they were on other islands in the Solomons. Because of that, detailed intelligence was lacking, not to mention that the coasts were extremely poorly charted. Some intelligence was developed by U.S. submarine operations, as well as robust aerial photographic reconnaissance from U.S. bases in the central Solomons. By the end of 1942, intensive Japanese patrols forced the evacuation of the few Australian coast watchers on the island, which were extracted by the U.S. submarine *Nautilus* (SS-168) on New Year's 1943, along with 29 civilians, including two elderly priests, 14 nuns, and three small children. On 29 March 1943, the submarine *Gato* (SS-212) inserted an Australian intelligence collection team onto the northern coast of Bougainville, and also came away with a cargo of nine civilian women, 27 children, and three nuns. (These after-action reports make for very entertaining reading.)

Based on the intelligence and reconnaissance reports, it was determined that the great majority of Japanese troops were located at the southeastern and northwestern ends of Bougainville (which was a fairly large island, the largest in the Solomon Islands and roughly 100 miles along the northwest-southeast axis) protecting the Japanese airfields. Halsey and Wilkinson decided to land where the Japanese weren't and build airfields, rather than try to capture the Japanese airfields. The Japanese airfields would be suppressed by the large Allied air force (489 Army, Navy, Marine, Australian, and New Zealand aircraft as of 1 November) based in the central Solomons. A location was chosen on the southwest coast of Bougainville about midway along the length of the island near Cape Torokina on Empress Augusta Bay, which was defended by only about 2,000 to 3,000 Japanese. Moreover, it would take the Japanese at the north and south ends of the island weeks or months to hack their way through the mountains, jungles and swamps to launch a counterattack. The landing site was swampy, but was suitable for building airfields. The location was also within range, barely, of Allied fighter cover from fields in the central Solomons. The code word for Empress Augusta Bay was "Cherryblossom," which came to be used for the entire operation, which was technically "Digger."

In mid-October, Halsey set 1 November as the date for the landings, and during the month of October, U.S. airpower pounded the Japanese airfields on and around Bougainville, rendering them effectively unusable, with over 3,200 sorties, many from newly established fields on Vella LaVella, with loss of only 26 aircraft. This force also included the first U.S. Navy night fighter squadrons with F-4U Corsair fighters and PV-1 Ventura aircraft, which operated under ground control intercept (GCI) direction.

In order to confuse the Japanese and reinforce their expectation that the United States would land at the southeastern end of Bougainville, Allied forces conducted two deception operations. One involved landing and occupying the Treasury Islands (a small island group just southeast of Bougainville) with New Zealand troops doing most of the land fighting. However, this landing was also the origin of the famous scene in the John Wayne movie *The Fighting Seabees*, in which an LST was under actual heavy fire on the beach when a Seabee raised the blade on a bulldozer as a shield, drove off the LST's ramp, and bulldozed and buried the Japanese fighting positions along with their occupants. The second operation, "Blissfull," was intended to be a diversionary landing and raid on the large island Choiseul, to the southeast of Bougainville, using a force of Marine paratroopers (who went in by landing craft). This operation also involved future President John F. Kennedy.

Lieutenant John F. Kennedy's Last Combat Action, November 1943

The movie, *PT-109*, and most accounts of future President John F. Kennedy's wartime experience in the Pacific in World War II, end following his and his crew's rescue after *PT-109* was rammed and sunk by the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri* on 2 August 1943. Kennedy's war wasn't quite over, as he declined an opportunity to return to the United States to recuperate. After rescue, he was given command of *PT-59*, which was converted to a gunboat by removing her torpedo tubes and depth charges during a forward-area refit that Kennedy supervised to his design. At the end, *PT-59* was equipped with two 40-mm guns (one forward and one aft), six shielded .50-caliber machine-gun mounts, two twin .50-caliber and two .30-caliber machine guns, a better radar on a taller mast, with the intent of making her more capable of sinking Japanese troop barges, which were too small and maneuverable for torpedoes (and were heavily armed, including Japanese troops not acting as passive passengers, but actively shooting back). By November, *PT-59* and some other PT boats had moved up the Solomon Islands from Rendova to Vella LaVella, with the new forward base commanded by Lieutenant Arthur H. Berndtson.

On 1 Nov, Berndtson was ordered to send PT boats to assist with the urgent evacuation of a small Marine force that had been inserted onto the island of Choiseul (Operation Blissfull) as a diversion to convince the Japanese that the United States intended to land at the southern end of Bougainville, as the Japanese expected, rather than at Empress Augusta Bay. The Marine forces on Choiseul (a total of about 750) were under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. "Brute" Krulak (who would go on to a distinguished career in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, before retiring as three-star commanding general, Fleet Marine Forces Pacific after clashing with General Westmorland and Washington over Vietnam strategy) and would be the father of the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Victor H. Krulak, Jr. (1995–99). Most of the operation on Choisel had gone reasonably well, but an element of the force had run into trouble when landing craft had run aground up a river, forcing the Marines into a swamp and into a situation increasingly dire as up to 900 Japanese engaged them. When Berndtson received the order to send help immediately, there was only one PT boat fully armed and ready: *PT-236*. Kennedy's *PT-59* was refueling at the time, and only had enough fuel on board to make it to Choiseul, but not enough to get back. Berndtson gave Kennedy the option to go or not, with the plan that *PT-236* would tow *PT-59* back when she ran out of fuel. Kennedy chose to go.

The two PT boats, joined by a third, crossed "The Slot" between Vella LaVella and Choiseul, but initially missed the landing craft that was supposed to guide them in. Finally, Kennedy spotted the landing craft at 1800. The PT boats arrived for the extraction in the gathering darkness, in heavy seas and rain. Another PT boat skipper, who had been ashore with the Marines as a liaison, came aboard *PT-59* to act as guide, along with Krulak. The Marines ashore boarded a pair of landing craft that had gotten un-stuck, only to get stuck again when they ran onto a reef. Kennedy maneuvered *PT-59* so that she was between the shore and the stranded craft to provide cover. He opted not to fire on the shoreline out of concern that there might still some U.S. personnel trapped ashore and then rescued 55

Marines from the boats, who were eventually transferred to another landing craft before the overloaded *PT-59* ran out of fuel about 0300. Several of the Marines were wounded, and one died in Kennedy's bunk from his wounds. While being towed back across the slot during daylight by *PT-236*, Kennedy called for air cover, which was provide by several Australian P-40s that were all shot down by Japanese fighters. However, the vulnerable PT boats were not attacked.

Two nights later, on 3–4 November, *PT-59* participated with four other PT boats and several landing craft to extract the remainder of Krulak's force, which suffered nine dead during the course of the Choiseul operation (143 Japanese were killed). Over the next several nights, *PT-59* destroyed three beached Japanese barges, engaged two more that got away, and fired on Japanese positions on several islands. On the night of 16–17 November, *PT-59* conducted a routine patrol that would prove to be Kennedy's last. A doctor sent him back to the hospital on Tulagi due to the back injury that had become re-aggravated when *PT-109* had been sunk, as well as excessive weight loss. Kennedy received a perfect mark (4.0 back then) on his fitness report for leadership. The report stated that he "demonstrated a cool effectiveness under fire and exhibited good judgment and determination under entirely strange conditions." *PT-59* may actually be underwater in the Harlem River in New York City, and may even be recoverable.

(Sources include a great article in the December 2018 issue of U.S. Naval Institute's *Naval History*, "Raid on Choiseul" by John Prados.)

Bougainville Landings, 1 November 1943

Due to the impending execution of Operation Galvanic (the initiation of offensive operations in the Central Pacific at Tarawa and Makin islands, scheduled for 20 November 1943), resources for the Bougainville operation were limited to the bare essentials. All battleships and heavy cruisers had been withdrawn from the Solomons area (and battleships hadn't gone into restricted waters since November 1942) and allocated for employment in Galvanic. Wilkinson's amphibious force was limited to 12 attack personnel transports (APA), attack cargo transports (AKA), several fast destroyer transports (APD), and LSTs for amphibious lift. Given the proximity of Japanese airfields at Rabaul (only about 200 miles), Wilkinson's plan was designed to minimize the amount of time that vulnerable transports remained exposed in Empress Augusta Bay. Troop and cargo transports were not fully loaded, so that they could make quick getaways. Reinforcement would be accomplished by successive echelons of transports and LSTs, escorted by light cruisers, that would sail to Bougainville, land their cargos, and be gone within a matter of hours. Incorporating many lessons learned from Guadalcanal and the North Africa and Sicily landings, the landing force at Bougainville was far more efficient and much quicker in off-loading than the previous operations, and served as a model for many more to follow.

The night prior to the landing, Halsey ordered Rear Admiral Aaron S. "Tip" Merrill's force of four light cruisers to bombard Japanese positions near the airfield on Buka (an island just off the northwestern tip of Bougainville, and the location of the second-largest concentration of Japanese troops) to further confuse the Japanese and divert attention from Empress Augusta Bay. It was during this operation that the commander of Destroyer Squadron 23 earned his nickname "31-Knot Burke" (Captain and future CNO Arliegh Burke).

At dawn on 1 November, the 12 troop and cargo ships in three separate groups via three routes simultaneously converged in Empress Augusta Bay, putting ashore 14,000 Marines of the 3rd Marine Division, along with over 400 U.S. Navy Seabees of the 53rd Naval Construction Battalion, most landing with the second wave and including Carpenter Samuel J. Cox (my grandfather, who would make chief and finish the war as a warrant officer). Within days the Seabees would commence construction of two fighter airfields and one bomber field, and would endure 81 air raids, as well as artillery, mortar and sniper fire, not to mention swamps and insects. Wilkinson remained in command of the entire operation until 16 November, while forces ashore were under Major General Alexander Vandegrift, commander of I Marine Amphibious Corps, which

included the 3rd Marine Division, the Army's 37th Infantry Division and shore-based Navy elements. Also making its combat debut was the 1st Marine Dog Platoon, consisting of 24 dogs, mostly Dobermans, who proved very effective at sniffing out snipers and hidden Japanese positions.

As it turned out, only about 270 Japanese and one 75-mm gun were in close vicinity of the landing beaches, but they put up a credible fight, sinking four landing craft and killing 70 Marines before they had even made it to shore. The 75-mm gun was only taken out by the heroics of Marine Sergeant Robert A. Owens, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Numerous uncharted rocks, pinnacles, and reefs complicated but did not deter the landings; in many cases, the charts were miles off from reality.

It did not take the Japanese long to respond, with the first air attack from Rabaul coming in at 0735 and consisting of nine Val dive-bombers and 44 Zero fighters. Early warning, effective defense by land-based Allied aircraft, intense anti-aircraft fire, and well-rehearsed maneuvering by the transports resulted in all but 12 of the aircraft being driven off or shot down, with only one near miss on a destroyer-transport. The next air attack, coming in at noon, was more formidable, consisting of 100 Japanese carrier aircraft (operating from Rabaul), but these were driven off by effective opposition from 34 land-based Allied fighters.

Prior to the initiation of the Bougainville operation, Admiral Mineichi Koga (who had replaced Admiral Yamamoto after he was shot down and killed in April 1943), the commander in chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, aboard the flagship super-battleship *Musashi* at Truk, ordered the carriers *Zuikaku, Shokaku*, and *Zuiho* to fly off their air groups to Truk and thence to Rabaul to conduct attacks against U.S. forces in the central Solomons. This deployment was called "Operation *Ro*." The carriers returned to Truk after launching their aircraft. Although this significantly reinforced the already considerable number of Japanese navy and army aircraft at Rabaul, the deteriorating quality of the pilots would be readily apparent—although some were still extremely good.

At the end of the day, having survived the air attacks, the transports began withdrawing in accordance with the plan. Wilkinson gave permission for the transports to bombard Cape Torokina with their guns (in most cases a single 5-inch gun intended for self-defense). Although not terribly effective, the bombardment was a huge morale booster for the transport crews. However, a Japanese surface force was on the way to Empress Augusta Bay, with the intent to replicate the Allied disaster at Savo Island during the Guadalcanal landings in August 1942.

The Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, 1–2 November 1943

A Japanese force of two heavy cruisers and escorts from Rabaul under the command of Rear Admiral Sentaro Omori initially reacted to Rear Admiral Tip Merrill's Task Force 39's bombardment of Buka Island, but turned back after being discovered by U.S. reconnaissance. However, when word reached Japanese commanders about the U.S. landings on Bougainville, Omori was ordered to join with a force of five destroyer-transports with almost 1,000 Japanese troops embarked, and make for Empress Augusta Bay to engage the U.S. Navy and to conduct a counter-landing. However, after believing he'd been spotted by a U.S. submarine, and after an unidentified aircraft dropped a bomb in the night that narrowly missed the light cruiser *Sendai*, Omori believed that the element of surprise had been lost. He recommended to higher authority that the destroyer-transports with embarked troops be sent back to Rabaul, while the rest of his force continued with the mission to attack U.S. transports in Empress Augusta Bay (which were in reality already withdrawing in order to prevent just such an engagement). Omari's recommendation was approved. As the Japanese force closed on Empress Augusta Bay, at 0130 on 2 November, a bomb from a U.S. aircraft conducting a night attack struck the heavy cruiser *Haguro*, which resulted in a significant speed reduction for the entire Japanese formation.

The Japanese force approached Empress Augusta Bay from the northwest in three parallel columns. The center column consisted of the two heavy cruisers (ten 8-inch guns and 24-inch torpedo tubes)

of Cruiser Division Five, led by *Myoko* (Omori's flagship) with *Haguro* in trail. On the left flank (closest to Bougainville) was the light cruiser *Sendai* (with Rear Admiral Ijuin, the victor at Vella LaVella, embarked) followed by the destroyers *Shigure* (veteran of many battles,) *Samidare,* and *Shiratsuyu*. On the right flank, light cruiser *Agano*, with Rear Admiral Morikazu Osigi embarked, led the destroyers *Naganami, Hatsukaze,* and *Wakatsuki*.

The U.S. force, TF 39, under the command of Rear Admiral Merrill, knew the Japanese force was coming (thanks to unusually accurate reporting by U.S. Army aircraft) and had taken up a blocking station running north-south legs at the western end of Empress Augusta Bay, setting up the opportunity to cross the Japanese "T." Merrill's force was also in three columns, with the four light cruisers (12 6-inch guns) of Cruiser Division 12: *Montpelier*(CL-57, Merrill's flagship), *Cleveland* (CL-55), *Columbia* (CL-56), and *Denver* (CL-58) in the center. On the right (east) flank and slightly ahead was Destroyer Division 45, led by *Charles Ausburne* (DD-570) with Commander Destroyer Squadron 23 Captain Arleigh Burke embarked, with *Dyson* (DD-572,) *Stanly* (DD-478) and *Claxton* (DD-571) in trail. On the right flank and slightly behind was Destroyer Division 46, led by *Spence* (DD- 512) with the division commander, Commander Bernard Austin (and future vice admiral and commander of Second Fleet) embarked, followed by *Thatcher* (DD-514), *Converse* (DD-509), and *Foote* (DD-511).

The U.S. force consisted of all-new *Cleveland*-class light cruisers and *Fletcher*-class destroyers, all completed since the start of the war. The cruisers each carried four three-barrelled turrets with radar-directed rapid-fire 6-inch guns (however, unlike Japanese cruisers, U.S. cruisers did not carry torpedoes, trading the weight for additional anti-aircraft protection, and the U.S. cruisers were festooned with 5"-inch/38-caliber dual-purpose, 40-mm, and 20-mm anti-aircraft guns). The flagship *Montpelier* and *Denver* carried the latest FH (Mark 8) radar with a B-scope (top-down view centered on the target) for significantly improved radar-directed gunfire accuracy (in theory, anyway) than the slightly older FC radar on *Cleveland* and *Columbia*, which were equipped with the harder-to-interpret A-scopes. All of Merrill's ships now had some form of a combat information center (CIC). Merrill also benefited from hard experience (gained during Rear Admiral "Pug" Ainsworth's defeats at Kula Gulf and Kolombangara in the central Solomons). With the CICs, radar, improved communications (such as IFF gear), and experience, Merrill could operate with a much more complex formation than previous battles, and execute more complicated maneuvers to avoid Japanese torpedoes. The force had trained to use controlled salvo fire rather than continuous fire, in an attempt to improve radar-directed night gunfire accuracy. Merrill also had a written battle plan, with the intent that he would unleash his destroyers to conduct a stealthy torpedo attack, opening fire with cruiser guns only after the destroyer torpedoes had hit their targets (or had missed). Although not necessarily intentional, this copied Japanese tactics for night battle (minus the radar-directed gunnery). Post-battle reports would indicate that without the CICs on the ships, this battle would have been impossible for Merrill to execute, and the CIC had come a long way since the rudimentary one on *Fletcher* (DD-445) only a year earlier.

At 0227 on 2 November, *Montpelier* detected the Japanese at a range of 35,900 yards, while haze degraded Japanese lookout's ability. Merrill's force was on a northerly track at the time. Merrill ordered Burke's destroyers to race ahead and then attack the Japanese from the enemy's left flank. Burke got into position and launched 25 torpedoes at the Japanese at 0246 without being detected. However, as Burke's torpedoes were in the water, a Japanese scout plane dropped flares over the U.S. cruisers. Although Rear Admiral Ijuin on *Sendai* could barely make out the flares in the haze, he immediately changed course and launched eight torpedoes at the U.S. cruisers, which spoiled the aim of Burke's torpedoes, causing all of them to miss. However, the sudden course change caused the destroyers *Samidare* and *Shiratsuyu* to collide with considerable damage, including several gunfire hits from Burke's destroyers, causing both of them to commence a withdrawal.

Upon seeing *Sendai*'s course change on radar, Merrill assumed Japanese torpedoes were in the

water heading for him and that Burke's torpedoes would miss. Before turning away to defeat the torpedoes, Merrill ordered his cruisers to open fire at 19,000 yards and, typical of night battles, the closest Japanese ship, in this case *Sendai*, was smothered in an avalanche of fire from all four U.S. cruisers and left immobile with a jammed rudder. The charmed destroyer *Shigure* came through this initial exchange (and the rest of the battle) unscathed.

At about 0250, as he changed course to thwart the Japanese torpedoes, Merrill ordered Austin's destroyers to attack. As Austin commenced his run, the destroyer *Foote* misinterpreted the orders and got separated, wandering alone in the dark between the two forces until a Japanese torpedo from *Sendai* intended for the U.S. cruisers blew her stern off, killing 18 and wounding 17. For the rest of the battle, *Foote* struggled to stay afloat and was a floating hazard to navigation with several near-miss collisions.

With the initial exchange between *Sendai* and the U.S. cruisers, Rear Admiral Omori turned his two heavy cruisers to the south and then into an indecisive oval course, during which the destroyer *Hatsukaze* attempted to pass between the two cruisers and was rammed by *Myoko*, slicing off a large chunk of *Hatsukaze*'s bow and leaving her immobile. The Japanese destroyers on the southern flank wandered seemingly aimlessly, for which Rear Admiral Osugi would be heavily criticized and relieved of command after the battle. *Haguro* was hit by six U.S. 6-inch shells, four of which were duds. At about this time, the Japanese heavy cruisers finally had good visual sightings on the U.S. cruisers and opened fire with guns and torpedoes around 0313. As Japanese gunfire became increasingly accurate, and *Denver* was hit by three 8-inch shells that failed to explode, Merrill had the cruisers retreat behind a smoke screen.

Austin's destroyer torpedo attack fizzled when *Spence* and *Thatcher* collided with a glancing blow. Although damage was minimal, the collision caused Austin to leave the CIC for the bridge, where he found the radar repeater there had been knocked out. Temporarily "blinded," Austin had to rely on word from a confused CIC officer, who believed that Japanese ships were actually American (Burke's destroyers.) The ships were, in fact, Japanese, and post-battle reconstruction revealed a missed opportunity to torpedo the two Japanese heavy cruisers. Despite all the advantages of radar, confusion was still rampant and U.S. ships fired on each other, or held fire not certain of who was who, and for some reason the IFF gear on Austin's destroyers didn't work. *Spence* was hit at the waterline by a Japanese shell that didn't explode, but water in her fuel lines would later severely reduce her speed. Austin's destroyers then focused on pummeling the burning *Sendai*, eventually joined by Burke's destroyers. *Sendai* stubbornly stayed afloat, but eventually went down with 184 of her crew, including her captain; Rear Admiral Ijuin would later be rescued by a Japanese submarine.

At 0337 Omori ordered his forces to disengage, believing he had sunk more U.S. ships than he had (actually, none) and increasingly concerned with being caught at daylight by Allied air attack. The U.S. cruisers initially pursued, firing on the adrift destroyer *Hatsukaze*, with no hits, before turning back, also concerned by air attack at dawn. During the 0400 hour the U.S. destroyers engaged in a wild melee with the remnants of the northern Japanese column. At one point Austin waved off an attack by Burke, thinking that his own ships were actually Burke's target, when in fact Burke was targeting the retreating *Samidare* and *Shiratsuki*, which both got away despite their collision damage. Burke inadvertently returned the favor, accidentally firing on *Spence*, and apologizing while the shells were in the air, which fortunately missed. Sometime during this period, the destroyer *Hatsukaze* exploded and sank with the loss of all 240 hands.

At daybreak, the U.S. force had gathered in proximity to the damaged *Foote* when the expected Japanese air attack came, from 100 carrier planes that had arrived at Rabaul the day before. Land-based U.S. and New Zealand aircraft put up a stiff fight, and the vastly improved U.S. surface ship AAA capability resulted in about 25 Japanese aircraft being shot down. The Japanese succeeded in obtaining only two hits, both on *Montpelier*'s starboard catapult (which on the new *Cleveland*

cruisers was located at the stern rather than amidships as in earlier cruiser designs, which had proved to be fire hazards), with minimal injuries. Even with their ship in grave danger of sinking, *Foote*'s crew downed several Japanese aircraft before being successfully towed to safety thanks to a superb damage control effort. (*Foote* was repaired and returned to action later in the war.) Fortunately, planes from General Kenney's Fifth Air Force in New Guinea struck Rabaul at an opportune time, preventing follow-on strikes on Merrill's force, although at great cost: 18 U.S. bombers and fighters were lost in what was known as "Bloody Tuesday," when Kenney's aviators encountered Japanese carrier pilots for the first time.

In the end, Merrill accomplished his objective of keeping the Japanese out of Empress Augusta Bay (even though most of the transports had already hightailed it out). Omori failed in his mission and was relieved of command. In exchange for one badly damaged U.S. destroyer, the Japanese lost one elderly light cruiser (*Sendai*) and one destroyer (*Hatsukaze*) with varying degrees of gunfire and collision damage to other ships. Exact Japanese personnel losses are not clear with accounts ranging from 198 to 658 dead (Morison estimated 320 Japanese killed), although the number appears to be at least 430. The 658 may include sailors who made it ashore to Bougainville, but eventually perished there.

Despite Empress Augusta Bay being lauded as a great U.S. victory, it also revealed the extreme difficulty of hitting moving ships at night at great range (greater than Japanese torpedo range). The four U.S. cruisers expended 4,591 6-inch shells for an estimated 20 hits (which approached Spanish-American War standards of inaccuracy). The U.S. Navy fired 52 torpedoes for two hits (on already crippled *Hatsukaze* before she exploded). Although the Japanese expended far less ammunition (their guns couldn't fire anywhere near as fast as the U.S. 6-inchers), their results were just as dismal. With 88 "Long Lance" torpedo tubes, the Japanese achieved only one hit, and *Foote* wasn't the intended target. Only about six Japanese shells hit their targets and four were duds. Despite the defeat at Empress Augusta Bay, the Japanese prepared for another counterattack by a far more formidable force of heavy cruisers.

(Sources include *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945* by Trent Hone, Naval Institute Press, 2018)

First Carrier Strike on Rabaul, 5 November 1943

In reaction to the U.S. landings on Bougainville, Admiral Koga, commander in chief, Japanese Combined Fleet, dispatched a force of six heavy cruisers , one light cruiser, and destroyers from Truk to Rabaul, with the intent of forming a powerful striking force to attack the U.S. landing and supporting forces. This force consisted of the heavy cruisers *Takao, Maya, Atago, Suzuya, Mogami, Chikuma,* and *Chokai,* and the light cruiser *Noshiro* under the command of Vice Admiral Takao Kurita. Although *Chokai* was detached to escort a troop convoy, the remainder continued toward Rabaul, when they were sighted and reported by a U.S. B-24 bomber. The report set off alarm bells in Halsey's headquarters as U.S. Navy forces in the Bougainville and Solomon Islands area had no heavy cruisers to match the Japanese force. The landings on Bougainville were cynically known as "Operation Shoestring II" (Guadalcanal being "Shoestring I) because so many resources had been drawn off to support the impending Operation Galvanic in the Gilbert Islands.

Halsey's response to the severe threat was typically bold. He ordered Task Force 38, consisting of the old carrier *Saratoga* (CV-3) and the new light carrier *Princeton* (CVL-23), under the command of Rear Admiral Frederick C. "Ted" Sherman, to attack the Japanese force in Rabaul on 5 November. The passage of time has dulled the shock and import of this order. No attempt had been made by either side to attack such a formidably defended major base with aircraft carriers since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Rabaul was believed to be defended by over 150 fighters; the actual number was considerably more with the arrival of

the *Zuikaku*, *Shokaku*, and *Zuiho* air groups at Rabaul on 1 November. Anti-aircraft artillery defenses of the harbor and roadstead at Rabaul were extensive. At that point in the war, U.S. carrier doctrine was still to conduct hit-and-run raids against isolated and relatively poorly defended targets. Sending only two carriers to duke it out against a major center of shore-based airpower (which could not be sunk) was indeed bold in the extreme.

Rabaul had been struck a number of times already by heavy and medium bombers and long-range P-38 twin-engine fighters of General Kenney's Fifth Air Force, operating from New Guinea and Australia. Kenney rivaled the Japanese for exaggerated claims regarding the effects of the strikes in the number of Japanese planes destroyed in the air and on the ground, ships in the harbor, or facilities. In describing a 349-plane raid on Rabaul on 12 October 1943, which accomplished far less than claimed, Kenney stated "Never in the long history of warfare had so much destruction been wrought upon the forces of a belligerent nation so swiftly at such little cost." Navy historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's later judgment was, "Never indeed have such exorbitant claims been made with so little basis in fact…except by the Japanese who out-Kenneyed Kenney." In a raid on Rabaul on 2 November 1943, a force of 78 B-25 medium bombers and P-38 fighters was intercepted by 112 Japanese Zero fighters (including the just-arrived carrier fighters) in an action known as "Bloody Tuesday" as nine B-25's and nine P-38's fell to Japanese fighters (who, however, lost 18 of their own). Nevertheless, this would be the potent threat environment that TF 38's strike would face, augmented by the anti-aircraft capability of the Japanese cruiser force itself.

Rear Admiral Sherman accepted that task without shirking. He had been the commanding officer of *Lexington* (CV-2) when she was sunk at the Battle of the Coral Sea. He had received a medal from the American Humane Association for going back into the burning bridge to rescue his black cocker spaniel, "Admiral Wags," and getting the dog to safety on a destroyer before being the last man off the ship. However, lest anyone think Sherman was a softie with misplaced priorities, he would be awarded three Navy Crosses (one from World War I submarine duty), three Distinguished Service Medals, and a Legion of Merit with combat "V" for his service in combat zones for almost the entire duration of the war.

Sherman's execution of Halsey's intent was as audacious as Halsey's order. As the carriers approached Rabaul, escorted by a relatively light screen of two anti-aircraft cruisers (*San Diego*—CL-53—and *San Juan*—CL-54) and nine destroyers, Sherman remained under the cover of a weather front until the last possible moment. He then launched every plane that could fly (97 in all) on the strike, holding nothing back for combat air patrol, counting on promises that land-based Allied fighters from the new airfield at Baraloma on recently-captured Vella LaVella in the central Solomons would provide cover to the carriers during the strike. The strike did have one considerable advantage: the new Grumman F6F Hellcat fighters, which had seen their combat debut on 5 October 43 on a carrier raid against Japanese-held Wake island in the Central Pacific, proving they were more than a match for the best Japanese fighters.

The strike was led by *Saratoga*'s Air Group Commander (CAG 12), Commander Henry H. Caldwell. *Saratoga* contributed 33 F6F Hellcat fighters, 16 TBF Avenger torpedo bombers, and 22 SBD Dauntless dive bombers, combined with 19 Hellcats and seven Avengers from *Princeton*, in a single strike package (mirroring Japanese doctrine). The plan was to damage as many Japanese ships as possible rather than concentrating on trying to sink a few. Putting all the heavy cruisers out of action was more important to the situation at hand than sinking a couple of them.

Visibility over the target was unlimited. The ships in Simpson Harbor (the inner harbor) and Blanche Bay (the outer roadstead) could be seen from 50 miles, and some of the cruisers were already getting underway in reaction to the incoming strike. The visibility actually proved useful, enabling Caldwell to coordinate attacks in advance via radio, since the operation had been put together in such haste that significant coordination had to take place in the air.

Fifty-nine Zero fighters were in the air waiting for the strike and were soon joined by at least another ten. However, the Zeros anticipated that the strike would use the same tactics as the Fifth Air Force and break into small groups that could be attacked piecemeal. Instead, Caldwell held the entire massive formation together through the heavy anti-aircraft fire, breaking into groups to attack individual ships only at the last moment, and releasing his fighters to attack the Japanese fighters. Caught by surprise by the U.S. Navy tactics, the Japanese fighters milled about demonstrating a reluctance to enter into their own AAA-envelopes (unlike the Japanese fighters at Midway that showed no such hesitation) and missing their opportunity to engage the U.S. bombers, contending instead with a new superior type fighter (the Hellcat) with which they had no previous experience.

Although U.S. torpedoes once again under-performed, the result of the strike was that six of the seven Japanese cruisers in Rabaul at the time were damaged, four of them heavily, resulting in the cancellation of the planned counter-attack by the cruiser force. (The two heavy cruiser survivors of Empress Augusta Bay, *Haguro* and *Myoko*, had departed Rabaul for Truk on 4 November). The *Atago* suffered three near-misses by 500-pound bombs, resulting in extensive damage that killed 22, including her captain. *Maya* was hit by one 500-pound bomb that went down her stack and exploded above her engineering spaces, killing 70 and putting her out of action for over five months. *Mogami* was hit by one bomb and set on fire, with 19 dead. *Takao* was hit under the waterline by two 500-pound bombs, suffering extensive damage with 23 dead. *Chikuma* was slightly damaged by several near-misses. The light cruiser *Agano* was damaged by a bomb hit and the light cruiser *Noshiro* was damaged by a torpedo hit. Three destroyers were also damaged, one hit by a dud torpedo. Eventually, all but *Maya* were able to depart under their own power, and those that could do so left the next day to return to Truk. The raid was a stunning success that accomplished the objective of protecting the beachhead on Bougainville from attack by a powerful Japanese surface force.

Although many of the U.S. aircraft came back badly shot up, only five fighters and five bombers were lost, with seven pilots and eight crewmen killed or missing. Caldwell had remained high to direct the strike, along with one Hellcat, and was engaged by eight Japanese fighters. With his turret disabled and his photographer killed, Caldwell was able to fend off the Zeros with his forward-firing machine gun. Both Caldwell and the Hellcat made it back to their carriers with badly damaged aircraft, the Hellcat with over 200 holes. Aircraft loss claims by both sides are pretty unreliable. The Japanese claimed to have shot down 49 aircraft and 20 probables. The actual U.S. loss was 13 aircraft (including operational loss). U.S. fighters were credited with shooting down 21 fighters, and U.S. bombers downed eight more. Japanese records only account for two Zeros. Somewhere in-between is probably the truth.

"Fireplug Sprinkles Dog": The First Air Battle of Bougainville, 5 November 1943

At twilight on 5 November 1943, following the U.S. carrier strike on Rabaul, a flight of 18 Kate torpedo bombers from Rabaul attacked a U.S. carrier force, causing one large carrier to blow up and sink, one medium carrier left ablaze and later sunk, plus two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and one destroyer sunk. Or so the Japanese claimed on Radio Tokyo. The reason you've probably never heard of this battle is because the only part that is true is that 18 Kates attacked a U.S. force near Bougainville.

The U.S. force attacked by the Kates actually consisted of *LCI-70* (landing craft infantry, configured as a gun boat) and torpedo boat *PT-76*, escorting *LCT-68* (landing craft, tank) back from Bougainville. In the gathering darkness, the lead Kate grossly misjudged size and distance when he dropped his torpedo. The torpedo never even hit the water before it passed through the wooden bow of *PT-76* without exploding, leaving the tail assembly stuck in the crews' head, while the plane clipped the radio antennae of *PT-76* and crashed into the water. *PT-76* then shot down another Kate with her 20-mm guns, which drenched the boat with water after crashing just off her port quarter. Meanwhile

four Kates launched torpedoes at *LCI-70*, three passing harmlessly directly under the shallow draft craft, while a fourth porpoised into the engine room without exploding, although the warhead came off and lodged in the bread locker. Although only one crewman was killed by the torpedo, the skipper, Lieutenant Junior Grade H. W. Frey, ordered abandon ship, concerned the warhead would explode, which wouldn't leave much left of that size craft. After a time with no explosion, Frey led a damage control party back on board, and the LCI was then towed to safety by *PT-76*. Thus ended the great "First Air Battle of Bougainville." Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson, commander of III Amphibious Force, sent a congratulatory message to the skipper of *PT-76*, Ensign Theodore Berlin, USNR, which concluded with "Fireplug Sprinkles Dog." Navy historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison judged that the Japanese claim was the "biggest feat of lying in the entire Pacific War." I'm not sure how he reached that conclusion, as there was plenty of competition for that title, and not exclusively Japanese.

Second Carrier Raid on Rabaul, 11 November 1943

After the success of the first carrier raid on Rabaul, what could be better than trying it again? Except waiting six days, by which time most of the ship targets had cleared out while the defenses remained. Halsey convinced Admiral Nimitz to temporarily allocate one carrier task group for a follow-on strike on Rabaul. This task group, which never relinquished its Fifth Fleet designation (TG 50.3) and under the command of Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery, consisted of the new *Essex*-class fleet carriers *Essex* (CV-9) and *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), and new light carrier *Independence* (CVL-22). In a snafu, when TG50.3 arrived in Third Fleet waters, the entire cruiser/destroyer screen was stripped away to support the Bougainville beachhead. By the time another suitable screen could be reconstituted, several days passed.

This time, the attack would consist of two carrier task groups, TG 50.3 and TF 38 (*Saratoga* and *Princeton*) re-designated TG 50.4 for the operation, and comprised three fleet carriers and two light carriers. Prior to the strike, the air groups on *Bunker Hill* and *Independence* were temporarily augmented by land-based Navy aircraft, including 23 VF-17 F-4U Corsair fighters. The VF-17 Corsairs had originally trained to operate from *Bunker Hill*, but the aircraft, with its poor forward downward visibility was deemed unsafe to operate from aircraft carriers (although later modifications to Navy and Marine Corps Corsairs did operate from carriers much later in the war). All the VF-17 Corsairs landed safely aboard the *Bunker Hill*, and provided CAP over the ship during the strike. *Bunker Hill*'s air group was also noteworthy as bombing squadron VB-17 was flying the new SB2C-1 Helldiver dive bomber, intended as a replacement for the SBD Dauntless. The strike on Rabaul would be the first combat employment of the Helldiver. (Although the Helldiver was an improvement in many respects over the Dauntless, it did not represent as dramatic an improvement as the Hellcat did over the Wildcat fighter). In addition, a dozen shore-based Hellcats flew out to *Independence* and temporarily augmented her fighters. Unlike the strike on 5 November, land-based air support by Army P-40s, intended to provide air cover during the strike, never showed up.

For whatever reason, the strikes by the two carrier groups were not timed to coincide. The strike from TG 50.4, *Saratoga* and *Princeton*, launched first on the morning of 11 November in relatively poor weather from northeast of Rabaul. Their strike aircraft went after one Japanese light cruiser and four destroyers that all successfully used rain squalls to avoid being hit. TG 50.4 got away undetected, but the strike alerted the Japanese to the subsequent strike by TG 50.3, involving about 185 U.S. aircraft, including over 100 dive and torpedo bombers, which were met by 68 airborne Zero fighters. Nevertheless, the Hellcats proved their worth in keeping the Japanese fighters at bay, and the strike was reasonably successful. The light cruiser *Agano*, damaged by a bomb in the 5 Nov strike, was hit by a torpedo and heavily damaged. The destroyer *Suzanami* was caught in the act of loading torpedoes when she was hit by a bomb that caused massive explosions that split her hull open and she quickly sank. The destroyer *Naganami* was

hit by a torpedo and heavily damaged, while the light cruiser *Yubari*and two other destroyers were damaged by strafing.

During the strike, Lieutenant Junior Grade Eugene A. Valencia shot down a Zero, the first of what would eventually be 23 kills, making him the third-highest-scoring Navy ace of the war. In the combat debut of the Helldiver, of 33 embarked, one was shot down by a Zero, one shot down by flak, and two lost due to operational causes. One of the Helldivers returned with 130 holes, indicating the aircraft was as tough as the Avenger).

After returning from the strike, in accordance with Halsey's direction, TG 50.3 began preparations for launching a second strike of the day. However, the Japanese responded to the first strike with one of their own, one of the largest anti-carrier strikes of the war. The Japanese force consisted of 27 Val dive bombers, 14 Kate torpedo bombers, escorted by 67 Zero fighters, followed by a number of G4M2 Betty twin-engine bombers, plus a few Japanese army fighters thrown in as well.

The Japanese strike was detected by SK radar at a range of 119 miles. However, Rear Admiral Montgomery only ordered the launch of a routine number of CAP aircraft, while continuing the re-arming of his aircraft for a second strike, until the full scale of the Japanese attack became apparent at about 40 miles. However, the VF-17 Corsairs did a good job of disrupting the incoming strike. The three aircraft carriers used new tactics, forming a single triangular formation of the three carriers in the center, surrounded by one circular screen (rather than operating as three separate groups as had been done in earlier battles). This tactic made much more efficient use of anti-aircraft resources (with the downside that if the Japanese found one carrier, they would find them all, although in this case it was clear the Japanese already knew where they were). As the raid came inbound, Montgomery somewhat belatedly issued the order "Man your guns and shoot the bastards out of the sky," which his ships were already doing. At 1412, Montgomery reluctantly cancelled the second strike.

The Japanese attacked in three waves. Valencia downed two more Japanese aircraft and shared a kill with another pilot. Although *Bunker Hill* bore the brunt of the attacks, one burning Val attempted a suicide attack on *Essex,* but crashed before it could hit. The action lasted about 46 minutes, resulting in the loss of about 35 Japanese aircraft with only ten sailors injured on board the carriers and with no hits obtained. What would have been in the early days of the war an overwhelming strike was shredded by the Hellcats, Corsairs, 5-inch proximity fuses and a dense thicket of 40-mm and 20-mm fire. Later that night, another Japanese strike attempted to find the carriers, but found Rear Admiral Merrill's three TF-39 cruisers (*Montpelier, Cleveland,* and *Columbia*) instead, and obtained no hits.

The U.S. claimed to have shot down 50 Japanese aircraft, which wasn't that far off. The Japanese lost all 14 Kates, 17 of 22 Vals,, and two Zeros in strikes on the carriers, plus several Betty bombers, and an additional six Zeroes lost over Rabaul. The U.S. carriers lost six TBF Avengers and eight F6F Hellcats during the Japanese strikes, but suffered no damage to the ships. After tallying up their losses, Admiral Koga withdrew what was left of the *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* carrier air groups back to Truk, replacing them with a lesser number of aircraft pulled from bases in the Marshall Islands, which played right into Nimitz' hands for the invasion of the Gilberts (Tarawa and Makin) on 20 November. In reviewing the results of the carrier strikes on Rabaul, Nimitz declared, "Henceforth we propose to give the Jap no rest."

(Additional source material includes the November 1999 *World War II* magazine article "Raids on Rabaul in November 1943" by Jon Guttman)

Reinforcement of Bougainville, 8 November 1943

Despite withdrawal of the Japanese carrier aircraft, Rabaul still based a significant number of Japanese navy aircraft, which attempted attacks on follow-on resupply and reinforcement efforts for the beachhead in Empress Augusta Bay. During a

reinforcement run on 8 November, 27 Val dive bombers escorted by 71 Zero fighters attacked U.S. transports, LSTs, and their escorts. Opposed by 22 land-based fighters, the Japanese strike succeeded only in hitting the transport *Fuller* (APA-7). Despite being set on fire, with five dead crewmen, two dead embarked soldiers, and 20 wounded, *Fuller*'s crew continued to off-load cargo (faster than the other cargo ships) while fighting the fires and saving the ship, which departed on time at 1837.

That evening, another 30- to 40-plane Japanese strike, including Betty bombers trained for night torpedo attacks, failed to find the transports. but did find the covering force of light cruisers *Santa Fe* (CL-60), *Birmingham* (CL-62), *Mobile* (CL-63), and Biloxi (CL-80) under the command of Rear Admiral Laurence A. DuBose. Like Merrill's force, these were all-new *Cleveland*-class light cruisers completed since the start of the war. The Japanese attempted three strikes on the cruisers between 1911 and 0100. At 1917, *Birmingham* shot down a Val dive bomber, but the bomb skipped into *Birmingham*'s stern just above the waterline and blew off the cover to the airplane hangar. A few minutes later, a Betty hit *Birmingham* with a torpedo that blew a 30-foot hole in her port bow. At 1942, a bomb from a falling Val hit the faceplate of the No. 4 turret. Despite the three hits (the only three of the night), *Birmingham* suffered only two killed and 34 wounded, but could still keep up with the formation and was fully combat ready. *Birmingham*'s skipper, Captain Thomas Inglis, would be the first post-war director of naval intelligence, eventually retiring as a vice admiral. (*Birmingham* proved to be an unlucky ship, when during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, she was close aboard courageously fighting fires on the burning light carrier *Princeton*, when *Princeton* suffered a massive explosion that killed 239 men and wounded 409 topside on *Birmingham*. Inglis would be awarded a Navy Cross for *Birmingham*'s efforts to save *Princeton*. After being repaired, *Birmingham*was hit by a kamikaze off Okinawa, losing another 51 crewmen.)

On the night 12–13 November, it was Merrill's cruisers' turn to come under concerted air attack. Four Betty torpedo bombers successfully boxed in *Denver*, which was hit by a torpedo in the after engine room, killing 20, wounding 11, and causing the ship to go dead in the water with a 12-degree list. Nevertheless, good damage control saved the ship and she was towed to safety.

USS McKean*'s Luck Runs Out, 17 November 1943*

The fast destroyer-transport *McKean* (APD-5, formerly DD-90), had been the sole survivor of Transport Division 12, whose other three ships had been sunk off Guadalcanal in August 1942, sacrificing themselves to sustain the U.S. Marines ashore during the period when the U.S. Navy supposedly "abandoned" the Marines following the devastating U.S. Navy defeat in the Battle of Savo Island. *McKean* subsequently made multiple supply runs to Guadalcanal and then later landed troops in the Central Solomon Islands at New Georgia, Rendova, and other islands between July and November 1943, including landing troops on Mono Island on 27 October 1943, setting up a key search radar site in preparation for the landings on Bougainville.

On 15 November 1943, *McKean* embarked 185 Marines as part of a force of eight LSTs and eight APDs taking a fifth echelon of reinforcements to Bougainville. It would be *McKean*'s third trip to Bougainville. During the transit, a Japanese scout plane sighted the force, reporting it as three aircraft carriers and 20 cruisers and destroyers. The Japanese, not wanting to miss this lucrative target, launched a night aerial torpedo attack, which found this force at 0350 on 17 November approaching Bougainville, 22 miles from the U.S. beachhead. The U.S. force shot down four Japanese twin-engine bombers, but one of them got off a torpedo before crashing. *McKean* turned to avoid the torpedo, but it struck her starboard quarter, detonating the after ammunition magazine and depth-charge racks, spraying flaming fuel oil over the after section of the ship, and jamming the ship's siren in the "on" position. A number of Marines jumped overboard before the abandon ship order was given, almost all of whom perished in the floating and burning oil.

After ten minutes, *McKean* began to sink, and the skipper, Lieutenant Commander Ralph. L. Ramey, gave the order to abandon ship at 0355 and was the last to go over the side at 0412. *McKean*'s forward magazine then exploded at 0415. Despite continuing torpedo attacks, three U.S. destroyers rescued survivors. Nevertheless, 52 Marines were lost along with 3 officers (of 12) and 61 crewmen (of 141). *McKean* was awarded a Navy Unit Commendation. The Japanese glorified this action as the Fifth Air Battle of Bougainville, claiming three carriers, two cruisers, and one unidentified ship sunk (which seems to me an even bigger lie than the "First Air Battle of Bougainville".)

Battle of Cape St. George: Arleigh Burke's "Almost Perfect" Victory

Throughout November 1943, the Japanese remained convinced that the U.S. landing at Empress Augusta Bay was a diversion and that the main American attack would come at either the northwest tip, near the airfield on Buka, or at the southeastern end of Bougainville. The Japanese did make an attempt at a counter-landing on 7–8 November, using four destroyer-transports with 475 Japanese infantry embarked. In something of an embarrassment, the destroyer-transports came right into Empress Augusta Bay undetected, off-loaded the troops, and escaped, and the next morning the Marines were surprised to find Japanese in their rear. However, there were well over 14,000 Marines on the beachhead by then, so that Japanese force didn't last long. Nevertheless, the Japanese continued to reinforce the island of Buka in anticipation of a U.S. assault there.

On the night of 24–25 November, a Japanese force of five destroyers was ordered to transport 920 troops from Rabaul to Buka. Based on intelligence and aircraft sighting, the five destroyers of Destroyer Squadron 23, under the command of Captain Arleigh Burke, were ordered to intercept. However, despite Burke's reputation for high-speed transits, the Japanese force had already gone past and had reached Buka, off-loaded the troops, and picked up 700 Japanese naval aviation personnel who were being withdrawn from Buka because the airfield was too badly damaged by Allied airstrikes to continue operations. Burke would reach an intercept point just in time to catch the Japanese destroyers on their return transit to Rabaul.

The Japanese force, Destroyer Division 31, was under the overall command of Captain Kiyoto Kagawa. The Japanese force was divided into two elements: the transport group, under the command of Captain Katsumori Yamashiro, consisting of three destroyers, *Amagiri* (which had sunk Kennedy's *PT-109*), *Yugiri*, and *Uzuki*, with the naval aviation personnel embarked. The escort group, under Kagawa's direct command, consisted of the destroyers *Onami* and *Makinami*. The group was transiting westerly with the transport group in column to the south and behind, and the escort group in column to the north and ahead of the transport group.

Upon departing Buka, Kagawa's force encountered a force of nine U.S. PT boats. The PT boats misidentified the ships as American and held fire until it was almost too late. The two escort destroyers attacked the PT boats, attempting to ram *PT-318*. *PT-64* was the only boat that managed to fire a torpedo at the Japanese (it missed), and the Japanese force escaped unscathed, and commenced their return transit to Rabaul until they were roughly halfway between Buka and Cape St. George, on the island of New Ireland.

Burke's destroyers approached from the south to the west of the Japanese, cutting off their route to Rabaul. Burke's destroyers were also aligned in two columns. The right (easterly) column was Destroyer Division 45, led by *Charles Ausburne* (DD-570) with Burke (DESRON 23) embarked, with *Claxton* (DD-571) and *Dyson* (DD-572) in trail. To the left (west) and slightly behind, was Destroyer Division 46, under the command of Commander Bernard Austin, with the destroyers *Converse* (DD-509, with Austin embarked) and *Spence* (DD-512) in trail.

All of Burke's destroyers were veterans of the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay, and all were new *Fletcher*-class destroyers equipped with a combat information center to integrate radar with all other

tactical data. Burke's battle plan was to execute tactics that he had devised earlier, which were based on lessons learned from Commander Cole on *Fletcher* (DD-445) during the 13th of November 1942 battle of Guadalcanal and the following U.S. defeat at the Battle of Tassafaronga. Burke had shared his concepts with Commander Frederick Moosbrugger, who used them in the decisive victory in the Battle of Vela Gulf. With radar and CIC, Burke would be able to split his force while minimizing risk of fratricide between his ships. His plan was to use one division of destroyers to initiate a stealthy torpedo attack, while the other division would provide covering gunfire, opening fire only after the torpedoes had hit their targets, or had missed, or surprise was lost. Moosbrugger at Vela Gulf and Burke at Empress Augusta Bay had used this tactic successfully, which represented a departure from pre-war doctrine that called on destroyers to use guns first, saving torpedoes for "high-value" targets (which in previous battles had resulted in destroyers going to the bottom with their torpedoes still on board).

At 0141 on 25 November, radar on *Dyson* detected the two Japanese destroyers in the escort group. Because of poor visibility, Japanese lookouts did not sight Burke's destroyers. Burke immediately turned to initiate a torpedo attack, while Austin's destroyers hung back to provide fire support or attack any other targets that appeared. Burke's three destroyers were able to approach to 5,500 yards without being detected and at 0155 launched torpedoes. By the time the two Japanese destroyers knew what was happening, it was too late. Burke's torpedoes only had 30 seconds left of run time before impact. Several torpedoes hit Kagawa's flagship *Onami*, which sank immediately with all hands, including Kagawa, and taking Burke's opposite number out of the battle in the first minute. The trail destroyer, *Makinami,* was hit by one torpedo, broke in two, and both parts went dead in the water.

Just before torpedo impact, radar on *Charles Ausburne* picked up the three destroyers of the transport force at 13,000 yards to the east. Burke immediately initiated an intercept course, ordering Austin to finish off the *Makinami*. The Japanese destroyers, laden with 700 aviation personnel, immediately turned to the north to make a run for it, which then turned into a protracted tail chase, with Burke's destroyers, at 33 knots, slowly gaining, and closing to about 8,000 yards. At 0215, acting on intuition, Burke zigged to starboard, which was followed by torpedoes from *Yugiri* (the tail-end destroyer) detonating in Burke's wake. At 0222, Burke opened fire, hitting *Uzuki* with one dud round. Burke then continued pursuit using only his forward guns in order to make maximum speed over ground. Eventually, however, the Japanese had to steer westerly to reach Rabaul, which enabled Burke to cut the corner and engage *Yugiri*. At 0305, a large explosion shook *Yugiri*, which caused her to go into a circle and fire her last torpedoes without effect. At 0326, *Yugiri* sank as Burke's three destroyers poured fire into the crippled ship, which went down with her skipper. In the meantime, Austin's destroyers finished off *Makinami*with torpedoes and guns. *Uzuki* and the unscathed *Amagiri* made good their escape as Burke called off the chase at 0404 due to fuel and ammunition state, and concern about being attacked by Japanese aircraft at daylight, since they were closer to Rabaul than any Allied surface ship had been to date. At daybreak, U.S. Army Air Force P-38 fighters appeared overhead and provided cover for the return transit.

Burke would be awarded a Navy Cross for the engagement, which would be described later by the U.S. Navy War College study as an "almost perfect action." Burke sank three Japanese destroyers without being hit or losing a man in what would be the last major surface action in the Solomon Islands campaign (and the last such action anywhere in the Pacific for many months). In his own account, Burke attributed much to Divine Providence. The *Ticonderoga*-class cruiser *Cape St. George* (CG-71) commissioned in 1993 was named after this victory.)

The Japanese, however, had accomplished their primary mission of reinforcing Buka with almost 1,000 troops, but lost 647 sailors and naval aviation personnel in exchange. Although her captain went down with the ship, most of *Yugiri*'s crew actually survived, with 278 being rescued by the Japanese submarine *I-177* (which was quite a feat for a submarine), and 11 more by *I-181*. (As an aside, *I-*

177 was almost certainly responsible for sinking the Australian hospital ship *Centaur* on 14 May 1943, with the loss of 268 crew and medical personnel; only 64 were rescued). Although *I-177* was sunk with all hands on 3 October 1944 by *Samuel S. Miles*—DE-183—her skipper at the time of the *Centaur* sinking was not on board and survived the war. He was tried for war crimes, but the sinking of *Centaur* could not be proved beyond reasonable doubt. He was, however, convicted of machine-gunning survivors in the water on three other occasions.)

Bougainville Wrap-Up

The capture of Bougainville (and eventually Buka, too) brought Rabaul within range of land-based Navy and Marine fighters and tactical bombers, and frequent strikes by these aircraft commenced 17 December 1943. The Japanese finally called off Operation *Ro* after claiming to have sunk five battleships, ten carriers, 19 cruisers, and seven destroyers. The actual tally was one destroyer-transport sunk (*McKean*) and several other cruisers, destroyers, and other ships damaged. Of the Japanese carrier aircraft (the 3rd Air Fleet) that deployed to Rabaul, 121 of 173 aircraft were lost, with 82 of 193 aircrew dead or missing. The primary result of Operation *Ro* was that the Japanese had few aircraft to respond to Operation Galvanic in the Gilbert Islands. The casualties in the land-based Japanese 11th Air Fleet were of similar proportion. Fighting on Bougainville would actually continue until the very end of the war. Japanese forces on Bougainville finally did cross through the mountains, swamps, and jungle to mount a major counter-attack on the Allied beachhead and airfield at Empress Augusta Bay in March 1944. The result was a massacre of the Japanese (for which gunfire from U.S. Navy destroyers was given significant credit). Following the failed Japanese attack, Australian troops took over responsibility for occupying the island of Bougainville and conducted offensive operations on the island against remaining Japanese forces until the war ended.

(Besides those already mentioned sources include: *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*, Volume VI of Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World WarII*. Also consulted were Naval History and Heritage Command's *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* (DANFS) entries for specific U.S. ships. The website combinedfleet.com provided extensive information on Japanese ships locations, operations, damage, and casualties based on Japanese records. *Information at Sea* by Captain Timothy S. Wolters, USNR, also is an invaluable resource on the evolution of U.S. Navy command and control during the war.)